

Daniel Branch. *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011*, Yale University Press, 2011, 366pp, Hardback, \$21.00

This extensive and fascinating book, on the political history of Kenya from independence to the present, is made up of the List of Illustrations, Acknowledgments, List of Acronyms and Abbreviations, Note on Orthography, Introduction, 8 chapters, Conclusion, Bibliography and, indeed, an index.

In the introduction, Branch contextualizes his analysis within the framework of the pre-independence politics and highlights the clout and activities of some of the major *dramatis personae* in the polity and political parties in the struggle leading to sovereignty in 1963. There were two major political parties that emerged out of British colonial womb to do battle for hegemony over the state after the departure of the imperial administrators. These were the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). Ideologically, KANU, with its leader Oginga Odinga, espoused a more centralized government while KADU, and its leader Ronald Ngala, favored a devolution of power to local authorities in a federal scheme of sorts (pp. 2-3). Waiting in the wings, as it were, was the indomitable and incarcerated Mzee Jomo Kenyatta of KANU, who was to become the first Prime Minister. Very much like other sub-Saharan African countries, the politics of this nascent nation-state suffered from the politics of ethnicity in the contestation for power around the Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin and Kamba, to name a few (p. 4); the recrudescence and insular interests of these ethnic groups were never to be taken for granted in light of the collapse of glue theory that hitherto agglutinated the groupings during the war for self-rule (p. 16). In spite of KANU's political victory, it was clear within the house of the party that ideological incongruence in the mode of operation of the society continued to persist; this was the case among those who called for the redistribution of the country's wealth (socialism) and those who stood firmly for the *status quo* – capitalism (p. 17). The discourse on this matter continues to define the political character of the republic.

Chapter One, "Freedom and Suffering, 1963-1969", brings to the fore the centrality of the problem of governing a multiethnic and multi-lingual society that revolves around the question of how to allocate natural resources so that an ethnic group does not claim to be marginalized in the process. The problem of the central government was how to control the entire country when centrifugal forces abound among groups whose hands are amputated, in a manner of expression, from exploiting the national coffers (p. 26). Moreover, Kenyans, like their relatives in West Africa and elsewhere were confronted with a critical debate on the issue of sovereignty, citizenship and identity. These subject-matters played themselves out among Kenyan Somalis and within the context of an irredentist war that arose as a result of a vision aimed at creating Greater Somalia from Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, etc. (pp. 29-35).

Compounding the problems of governance in the republic was the inability to fulfill the promise made to compatriots that political sovereignty from Britain would lead to economic autarky, too. Indisputably, exacerbating the dilemma of development in the republic was the fact that at independence Kenya, like Nigeria a former British colony, could not boast of adequate educated natives to step into the administrative shoes of the departing overseers.¹ Accordingly, the British continued to play a dominant role in the civil service

¹ James R. Sheffield, *Education in Kenya: A Historical Study* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1973); Ann Beck, "Colonial Policy and Education in British East Africa,

immediately following self-rule (p. 39); and they served with the interest of London at heart.

The political condition in the country was extremely wobbly due in part to political rivalries and inadequate economic policies to deal with the sufferings of a majority of the population; this reality was compounded by the antinomy in economic ideology among members of the ruling class; the clash was between those who were in favor of capitalism and those who advocated socialism; political ideology between liberals and conservatives within the governing party did not help matters either. The disagreement between these forces reached a crescendo when a coup plot was alleged to have been uncovered and promptly dealt with (pp. 42-52). But the allurements of African socialism continued to resonate amongst some dominant KANU leaders. However, in confrontation after confrontation on this subject, socialists tended to be on the losing end (pp. 52-58). At a point, this lingering powerful ideological discrepancy among the governing oligarchs eventually led to the splintering of KANU with the formation of Kenya People's Union (KPU) by Oginga Odinga in its wake. In the intra-party upheaval Jomo Kenyatta, the nationalist, did everything in his power to marginalize KPU reproaching it as "a Luo party (p. 63)."

Chapter two, sub-titled as "The Big Man, 1968-1969", tackles the issue of political succession. The battle line was clearly drawn between two formidable candidates, viz. Tom Mboya (a Luo) and vice president, Daniel arap Moi (a Kalenjin by ethnicity). Kenyatta "secretly" wanted Moi to be his successor but at the same time he wanted to stay above party politics in the selection of the heir to his political throne; thus, he never openly threw his support for either candidate (p. 69). Indeed, in Kenya, as in other African countries political ethnicity was and is always an important factor in the republic's political computation. Unfortunately, Mboya was assassinated (p. 79); and his death fortuitously left Moi in a relatively advantageous position to succeed his mentor, Mzee Kenyatta. But many Kikuyu politicians were not ready to play second fiddle in Kenyan politics. Little wonder, then, that some Kikuyu politicians avowed:

The government of Kenya is under kikuyu leadership, and this must be maintained. If any tribe tries to set itself up against the Kikuyu, we must fight them in the same way that we did fighting the British settlers. No uncircumcised leaders [i.e. Luo] will be allowed to compete with the Kikuyu. You shall not vote for any party not led by the Kikuyu (p. 85).²

Chapter three, "The Fallen Angel, 1971-1975", brings to the fore the criticality of land reform and the issue of corruption in the society. Patriots who had survived the war of liberation expected some form of recompense in light of their sacrifice for themselves and the fallen heroes but response to this demand did not come soon enough (p. 91). Kenyans, also, wanted

1900-1950" *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May, 1966), pp. 115-138; R. M. Walsh, "Education in British East Africa," *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 33, Issue 382 (January, 1952), pp. 22-32; Ogechi E. Anyanwu, *The Politics of Access: University Education and Nation-building in Nigeria* (Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2011).

² See F. Wafula Okumu, "Ethnic Politics and the Decay of the State in Kenya," in E. Ike Udogu (ed.), *The Issue of Political Ethnicity in Africa* (Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 106-109.

more lands passed from the settlers to the natives. The process of implementing such a policy was too incremental for the liking of ex-warriors and African farmers (p. 95). To intensify the discomfiture of citizens "... many Kikuyu were angered by the exacerbation of social inequality [in the society]. With good reason, they came to believe that the land transfer programme had been corrupted by elites for personal and political gains (p. 103);" in short, corruption was systemic. While the poor got poorer, the rich got richer through government and family connections (p. 120).

Chapter four, also sub-titled "Footsteps, 1975-1982", delves into the death of Kenyatta, succession of the president by Daniel arap Moi and his clashes with the country's intelligentsia. A major academic *bête noire* was Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He, like Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, was acerbic in his criticism of the policies of the government. It is true that many politicians in the developing world don't fancy or appreciate criticisms of their regimes – even constructive criticisms – if they work against their interest and those of their lackeys and financial backers (pp. 124-127). For his satirical depiction of the corrupt politics in the republic he suffered from the wrath of the government – detention (p. 126). And as President Moi continued to consolidate his power, he also started mimicking other African leaders by acquiring more power. He consciously or unwittingly considered the Kenyan state to be his private fiefdom (p. 139). Accordingly, he could do what he wanted with the state and to it. This blinkered approach to leadership and political injustice in the country angered civil society organizations – mainly lawyers, church leaders, scholars and university students who protested against President Moi and his administration's draconian policies. Universities in particular became the president's invented enemy (p. 153). Instead of admitting inadequacies in his policies, Moi blames academics noting that their "tactics endanger the country [and therefore must be squashed]."³ Given the political instability in the country, an abortive coup d'état by some disgruntled members of the Kenyan Air Force happened (pp. 154-159).

Chapter five is sub-titled "Love, Peace and Unity, 1982-1988". "Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make real mad,"⁴ is an aphorism some observers apply to the character of political and military despotic leaders in Africa (such as Khaddafy or Kaddafi of Libya and Sanni Abacha of Nigeria). Clearly, the politics on university campuses aimed at addressing the authoritarian regime of Moi had started to irritate the president. Attempts must be made to quell any uprising and to dislocate the backbones of dissidents – real or imagined – responsible for insurrection by whatever means possible including torture (pp. 162, 165-176). It was in light of this development that US interagency intelligence memorandum on November 1982 stated: "We believe, however, that he will turn increasingly to repression to maintain his hold on power, in part because of pressure from influential hardliners in the regime. He may buy time by intimidating his opponents, but he risks making new enemies and driving diverse groups to cooperate with one another and to consider extralegal tactics against the government (p. 161)." In the end, civil society organizations made up of the National Council of Churches, Lawyers and others coalesced to confront the political malaise – especially following the elections of 1988 (pp. 179-182).

³ Arthur W. Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 30-32.

⁴ See Wangari Maathai, "The Greenbelt Movement," *PBS-ETV Documentary: Independent Lens* (Thursday, January 5, 2012).

Chapter six, "The War of Arrows, 1989-1994", introduces a new era in the politics of Kenya – one that led to the opening up of the political space. This development was created in part by the end of the Cold War between Moscow and Washington mainly. This period saw a lively debate regarding the importance of a multiparty system and the need to enshrine it in the nation's constitution (p. 195). Presidents Moi's opposition to this revelation was piquant referring to the concept of multi-partyism as rubbish and emphasizing, like many of his colleagues in Africa, that "democracy is 'a luxury' that Africans cannot afford (p. 196)." These years, for example, not only saw the emergence of such parties as Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) and Democratic Party (DP) but also kindled a debate on ethnic federalism, *a la* contemporary Ethiopia, dubbed *majimboism* (p. 197).⁵

In chapter seven, "The Goldenberg Years, 1993-2002", two major issues, among other minor ones such as the revivalism of Pentecostal churches to provide a form of escapism from the vagaries of economic downturn and woes, are highlighted. The two key concerns are corruption as illustrated in the Goldenberg affairs in which Odinga admitted to have received campaign donation from a business tycoon, Kamlesh Pattni (pp. 218-221), and the question of political citizenship (pp. 224-225).

A summary of the first issue is captured caustically thus:

Corruption and insecurity soared at the cost of Kenya's democracy and economy. From the top to the bottom of society, those that thrived in Moi's final decade in power were the agents of disorder, who build their political powerbases, economic wealth and social status on their ability to manage and exploit the conditions of violence and criminality. Thuggery, the management of private militias and the ability to distribute the spoils of office around networks of clients became essential parts of the political system (p. 243).

As to the second problem, the issue of citizenship continues to dog many African countries in the aftermath of independence. The question has never been that of who is a Kenyan; the dilemma has been that of claiming that one is a Kenyan regardless of where one is domiciled, makes a living and contributes to the development of the community. For instance, to demand that a Kikuyu who lives in the Rift Valley should travel to his/her ancestral home either in northern or southern Kenya to cast his/her ballot for a candidate not only complicates but also problematizes the important issue of Kenya's political atomization. This problem of citizenship exacerbated by political ethnicity in many African states – not least in Kenya – is yet to be resolved.

The maxim, the more things change, the more they remain the same, captures the essence of chapter 8, titled "Nothing Actually Really Changed, 2002-2011". By its very nature, politics is conflictive. This, in fact, is more so when the state and politics are used as instruments by political and economic entrepreneurs to enrich themselves and protect their investments and those of their patsies or lackeys.⁶ The political *quid pro quo* arrangement made between Kibaki and Odinga in the 2002 election at the expense of ordinary Kenyans bears the forego-

⁵ Okumu, "Ethnic Politics and the Decay of the State in Kenya," pp. 102, 118-121.

⁶ Claude Ake, *Democratization of Displacement in Africa* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: CASS Occasional Monograph, No. 1, 1994), p. 7.

ing thesis out (p. 249). The 2007 political contestation that pitted Odinga and Kibaki as to who should wear the golden crown as president of the republic with control of the largesse that flowed from it did not improve the way politics is played out in Kenya.⁷ It was a reproduction of the character of the nation's politics since self-government.

In all, this book provides an extraordinarily meticulous description of the political and historical activities that transpired in Kenya from pre-independence, self-rule up to last year (2011). The author's scrupulous approach to details sometimes makes reading some of the chapters somewhat cumbersome. Nevertheless, the comprehensiveness of the research makes the volume very useful to students of African political history in general and, certainly, Kenyan political history in particular.

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⁷ E. Ike Udogu, *Confronting the Challenges and Prospects in the Creation of a Union of African States* (New Castle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2010), pp. 7-8; see James Anyanzwa and James Rateno, "Cabinet: What it will cost the taxpayers," USA/Africa Dialogue Series: Naming 40 cabinet ministers will come at a heavy price to Kenyan taxpayers. USAAfricaDialogue@googlegroups.com.

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